

Improving the Nation's Animal Shelters:

A Path to No-Kill

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Fred Meyer", is written over a horizontal line.

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**Abstract:**

Issues dealing with animals are commonly overlooked and ignored by the public and by the government. This is why there are so many problems with the animal shelters in this country. This holds true in Muncie, where the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals of Delaware County was recently investigated for charges of animal cruelty and neglect. In light of this investigation, the SPCA of Delaware County has closed their doors effective May 2003. With no other plans, the county is left without animal control and an animal shelter. Perhaps this is just what Muncie needed though? By looking at what other shelters have done to improve their adoption rates and decrease their need for euthanasia as a means of making room and coming up with ideas of their own, all animal shelters, including Muncie's, could get on the path to no-kill. Hopefully the day will come when all adoptable animals that enter a shelter in any city will be guaranteed a home.

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An animal shelter should be a place community members feel comfortable taking a stray animal they find or a pet they can no longer care for as well as somewhere people visit in their search for a new pet. But, it seems that animal shelters are seen more as necessary evils than positive aspects of our communities. Animal shelters can change this though. It will take hard work and a strong commitment from those involved, but by becoming a no-kill shelter any shelter can become a place of new beginnings for the innocent lives that pass through their doors instead of the place they go to die.

A no-kill movement is sweeping across the nation, but what does it actually mean? The generally accepted definition of no-kill is saving both adoptable (healthy) and treatable dogs and cats, with euthanasia reserved only for non-rehabilitatable animals ([www.maddiesfund.org](http://www.maddiesfund.org)). The term no-kill can be offensive though to shelters that do practice euthanasia as a means of managing the number of animals in their shelters. Some shelters that aren't no-kill feel that members of their community will wonder why they can't be a no-kill shelter, putting pressure on them to change. Others feel as if they will be looked down upon because they aren't no-kill. Many shelters that are no-kill won't label themselves as such as a way to avoid offending traditional shelters. But, if these shelters can be successful with their no-kill practice, they may pave the way for traditional shelters to change as well, thus no animal will have to be put down simply to make room for the next.

Today's animal shelters are an improvement from shelters that existed even fifteen years ago. According to [www.bestfriends.com](http://www.bestfriends.com), the website of the Best Friend's Animal Sanctuary in Utah, the year 1987 saw the record high number of animals that were destroyed in animal shelters across the country. 17 million animals were destroyed

in 1987, as compared to 5 million in 2001. This decline in part is due to the high adoption rates many shelters are experiencing. San Francisco, a leader in the no-kill revolution, has been very successful with it's adoptions, with save rate of 76 percent. San Francisco euthanized only 1,892 animals in 2002, compared to an average of 10,000-25,000 animals euthanized in cities of comparable size elsewhere. Another key component to decreasing the number of animal euthanized is an aggressive spay/neuter program. This ensures that fewer animals are being born each year that would otherwise end up in the shelters. Another step shelters are taking to prevent animals from being surrendered is to offer guides to moving with your pet, free or low cost obedience classes, and behavior counseling. Lastly, there are changes that can be made within the shelter to increase the adoption rate, like offering evening hours at least one night a week, and hours at least one weekend day, grooming and training animals when they come in, becoming a more visible part of the community by holding fund raisers and participating in community events, and providing the animals there with top of the line care. By working towards these steps, not only will millions of lives be saved from euthanasia due to pet overpopulation, but also every adoptable animal that enters a shelter will be able to find a home.

Many cities have already made the transition into no-kill communities. They have proved that this is a realistic goal, and by following their lead any city could feasibly make the change. By looking at what steps successful cities took to become no-kill and initiating similar steps in their own community, every city could join the no-kill revolution and begin saving all lives. San Francisco is one city that is able to call itself a no-kill community. The first step of their path began by separating the SPCA from

animal control. Animal control and animal care need to be separate entities that work together for a common goal. The city of San Francisco used to pay the SF-SPCA to be animal control, which means on top of caring for all the animals, they had to also go out and pick up animals, go on calls, and enforce laws. This is not all feasible, since the city was only paying a nominal amount to the SPCA for animal control. The San Francisco SPCA informed the city they would not be renewing their animal control contract, forcing the city to start planning a municipally run animal control which would allow the SPCA to focus on animal care. Even though they lost funds when they informed the city of San Francisco they would not be providing animal control any longer, in reality the funds they were being paid were not enough to provide humane care for all the animals they ended up taking in due to the contract. By splitting with the government, they were also free to run the shelter how they wanted. They were no longer at the mercy of tax dollars, meaning they could keep animals in the shelter as long as it took to find homes for them without fearing politicians of accusing them of wasting the taxpayer's money. As Richard Avanzino, who is on the executive board of the San Francisco SPCA, put it, "You can't be the animal's best friend and be their principal killer." Humane societies need to decide if they are comfortable playing the role of municipal shelters and humane societies, and if they aren't, they need to decide if it feasible to follow the steps the San Francisco SPCA took to become separate entities.

Aggressive spay/neuter programs are needed to decrease the number of animals coming into shelters. Along with spay/neuter programs, cities have begun enacting laws that encourage people to alter their pet. According to Mike Fry in his article "Proposed

Ordinance Change Could Help to End Pet Overpopulation in Minneapolis” on the Animal Ark web page ([www.animalark.org](http://www.animalark.org))

A proposed change to the animal care ordinance in Minneapolis should help the city to begin solving its pet overpopulation problem by promoting the sterilization of stray animals, without unnecessarily penalizing responsible citizens with additional fees or taxes.

The proposed plan would require people reclaiming intact animals older than 6 months of age from the city impound center to pay a spay/neuter deposit of \$40. This deposit would be refunded if proof of sterilization from a licensed veterinarian were provided within 45 days.

Utah has a similar law, although the deposit is only required upon the second impoundment of an unaltered animal. Owners are given one “freebie.” In Sacramento, CA, upon the second impoundment of an unaltered animal, it will not be returned to the owner until it is sterilized, and the owner must pay the cost of the surgery and redemption fees. In St. Louis, Missouri, laws are even tougher: any animal picked up by animal control must be spayed/neutered and microchipped (a form of identification placed under the skin) before being returned to the owner. Some cities require higher spay/neuter deposits, citing that people will not spay/neuter in order to reclaim the deposit if the deposit is not equal to or greater than the actual cost of the surgery. In any case, these laws target those that are creating the problem, not the general population who may not have a pet, or are responsible pet owners. “It seems only fair that people who allow fertile

animals to roam free should pay the moneys required to solve this problem” (Fry).

According to Mike Fry’s article, it costs taxpayers about \$2 billion each year to pick up, house, care for, euthanize, and dispose of unwanted animals. This number does not include moneys spent by private shelters on these same services. The total cost of pet overpopulation may be closer to \$4 billion. And, unaltered pets are more likely to roam and be aggressive towards other animals. This is because in their search for a mate, an unaltered dog or cat will escape from fenced yards, break free from chains, and fight with other animals of the same sex that may be competing for the same mate. Therefore, since unaltered animals are causing more of the animal control problem, it is only fair to punish those who allow an unaltered animal to roam. An Argument against this kind of legislation is that it should be an owners right to breed. But, breeding should be done solely to improve a breed. Unless you believe the mating of two animals will produce a litter superior to the current generation of that breed, the animals should not be bred. This sort of legislation does not target responsible dog breeders who purposefully breed two dogs in an effort to produce puppies of excellent lineage and should not be opposed by these breeders. Responsible breeders will also take measures to prevent unaltered animals to mate, as mixed breed puppies are not in the best interest of the breeder. This legislation only targets those people who let their unaltered pets roam and mate with an unknown animal, therefore adding to the pet overpopulation problem. Along with legislation, aggressive spay/neuter programs must be enacted. In 1998, then Governor Wilson signed a piece of legislation that did just that. The legislation required pre-adoption sterilization of cats and dogs from shelters and private rescue organizations. This targeted the problem of overpopulation at its source: unaltered pets that were allowed to breed uncontrollably.



At least with this legislation, shelters were not adopting animals that would just add to the problem. The municipal shelter in Lodi, California, was awarded a grant from the Maddie's Fund organization to enact a Pet Rescue Project that included a spay/neuter coupon program to increase sterilization surgeries and decrease shelter euthanasia in their town. Because of this program, in just two years Lodi was able to decrease total shelter deaths from over 1400 to 1300 one year after the program began, and down to 790 just two years after the implementation of the program. What's more, is total shelter deaths of adoptable animals went from nearly 600 before the Pet Rescue Program, to 131 adoptable pet deaths just two years after the program was enacted. Likewise, in March of 1999 in Indianapolis, a low-cost spay/neuter clinic opened their doors. Their goal was to perform as many surgeries as possible at the lowest cost possible. Since the opening of FACE (The Foundation Against Companion-Animal Euthanasia), they have performed over 30,000 surgeries for Indianapolis and the surrounding area. As a result, the Indianapolis Humane Society and Animal Control of Indianapolis have seen a reduction in the intake of animals as well as the number of animals euthanized in their shelters. Animal Control reported a decrease of 160 animals coming into their shelters in January of 2002 as compared to January of 2001. They also reported a decrease from 869 euthanasia deaths in 2001 to 730 euthanasia deaths in 2002. Aggressive spay/neuter programs, and legislation targeting those who allow their unaltered pets to roam will be crucial in decreasing the number of animals that enter shelters each year and in turn the number that are killed each year at shelters.

When an owner brings an animal to a shelter to surrender it, there is usually a reason behind it other than they simply do not want it. Either they are moving and feel it

would be too hard to take the pet, or the pet misbehaves and they don't know what to do to correct the problem. In either case, surrendering the pet should not be the first step taken by the owner. But, if the owner does turn to the shelter to take the pet, the shelter should be able to offer alternative solutions and surrendering the pet should be last on the list. In the case of moving, many owners say it would be too hard on the pet. But, when asked questions, it usually turns out that the owner just doesn't feel like dealing with the extra hassle during what can be a stressful enough situation. This is why animal shelters should have a list of pet friendly apartments and rental housing available to pet owners. This helps owners find appropriate housing quicker and does not let them use the excuse that there they are not able to find housing that allows them to keep their pet. To make it even easier for senior citizens to move with their pet, currently in New York, legislation is trying to be passed by the Humane Society that would prevent senior citizens from being denied housing solely because they have a pet (given the pet is not a nuisance). This is crucial legislation for animals because the inability for people to find suitable housing with their pet is a reason pets are surrendered to shelters to begin with. By passing this legislation, an owner wouldn't have to give up their pet in order to have a place to live. Behavior problems also tend to be a reason people surrender their pets. Free obedience counseling and free or low-cost training programs should be available for owners to try before surrendering their animals. The Richmond, Virginia SPCA has a 24-hour behavior counseling hotline that owners can call for help with their problems. This hotline aims to correct the pet's problem before it gets to the point that owners feel surrendering the pet is the best option. Shelters could also offer free or low-cost behavior training, to further help with correcting pet's behavior problems before they become too

bad. One behavior specialist and staff or volunteers could run the classes so the shelter is able to offer the classes at reasonable rates to the public.

Within shelters, there are things that can be done such as extending open hours, having volunteers groom and give basic obedience training to the animals, becoming a more visible aspect of the community, and providing animals within the shelters with proper care to make themselves more enticing to the public. Extending open hours seems like an obvious answer, yet there are few shelters that have evening and/or weekend hours. One complaint volunteers at the Animal Rescue Fund of Muncie, Indiana receive quite often about the shelters in Muncie is that they are not open during hours that are convenient for the public. Although workers may not want to be open during the evening or weekend hours this is very important. If a family can't visit an animal shelter because the kids are in school or the parents are working, they are likely to go to a pet store with longer open hours, but where animals are purposefully bred and not likely to be spayed or neutered, thus adding further to the problem. Shelters should offer evening hours at least one weekday a week, and have open hours during at least one of the weekend days if not both. Grooming the animals would also further increase adoptions. Potential owners do not want a smelly, scruffy looking pet. Students at local grooming programs and veterinary tech programs could be brought in once or twice a month to groom animals, and to teach staff at shelters basic grooming techniques. Volunteers could bathe and brush the animals while leaving the more difficult animals to the more experienced groomers. Professional groomers in town could be asked to groom animals in exchange for free advertising at the shelters. Animals that have been groomed by professional groomers can be showcased in a display with a mention of who groomed them, thus

getting the groomer's name out to potential owners. Potential owners would not like ill-behaved animals either. Basic obedience training should be taught to the animals before they leave the shelter. An animal that does not jump on people and knows commands such as sit and lie down is much more appealing than one that jumps all over a person and knows no commands. At the Madison County Humane Society in Anderson, Indiana, a couple volunteers their time to teach behavior classes that shelter staff and other volunteers attend along with a shelter dog. This provides dogs with basic obedience and makes them more appealing to the public. Extending hours, grooming the animals, and behavior training for the animals are all ways that shelters can make their animals more appealing to potential owners.

Shelters also need to be viewed in a positive light. People should be excited about visiting them to find a pet, and not worrying about the conditions of the building and animals. All shelters should maintain a clean environment for the animals, and also for the people who go to look for a pet. A clean shelter will draw in more people. Another complaint that volunteers at ARF in Muncie, Indiana is that the shelters in Muncie are too dirty and dark. They say that they feel uncomfortable adopting an animal from an unclean environment. Many people think that the animals aren't clean as a result of a dirty living space. Even though a shelter animal may be the picture of health, if a person isn't comfortable at the shelter, they will not stay long enough to find this out. Maintaining a clean atmosphere will improve adoptions because people will not feel compelled to leave quickly and will feel more confident that their new pet is clean and healthy as well.

Shelters should be the last place an animal should be neglected or abused. But it does happen. Sometimes it is simply because the shelter staff is so overworked, they may

not have the time or energy to clean another cage or walk another dog. This not only hurts the animals because they are not getting the proper care they deserve, but it also hinders people from visiting shelters. Pat Springer, of Cincinnati, Ohio, reported that she did not want to visit a shelter to find her next dog because she felt guilty for only taking one. She felt that whoever she didn't take would be left to sit their cage all day and possibly put to sleep, and this made her feel so bad that she didn't even want to visit a shelter. If people knew that the animals at shelters were properly cared for, they would be far more likely to visit a shelter as they search for a pet because they are not left with the guilt they would feel otherwise. This care that shelters give to animals should be given until the end of the animal's stay at the shelter, or in some cases until the end of the animal's life. Even in a no-kill society, euthanasia will still be a fact of life. Extremely aggressive animals, animals that have been used for fighting, and animals that have little quality of life due to ailing health, will always be brought into shelters and there is little else to do with them except put them down. In these cases, the least the people working at the shelter can do for them is offer the most painless death possible. But, this is not always the case. The American Veterinary Association recommends the only method that should be used for euthanasia is a lethal injection of sodium pentobarbital into a vein. Sadly though, there are shelters that do not follow this recommendation. Shelters still use carbon monoxide chambers to kill multiple animals at once. This is an extremely cruel way to kill an animal as it causes unnecessary suffering. The chambers are loaded to capacity with animals of different species, sizes, ages, and temperaments before filling the room with carbon monoxide. The rooms grow increasingly hot and the animals are aware of suffocation before eventually losing consciousness and dying. Legislation was

passed in California in the year 2000 that made this practice illegal, but it is still used in some shelters in other states as a way to destroy unwanted animals. This is not the only shocking means of getting rid of excess animals. According to the Humane Society of the United States, there are shelters in Kentucky that shoot animals in the head with a handgun. Animals are not always killed upon impact though. The shooter may be slightly off, and some animals may take more than one bullet to die. Once shot, animals are piled up, some still alive left to bleed to death. A piece of legislation is in the works to outlaw this practice from being used in animal shelters. In Delaware County, Indiana police investigated the SPCA on charges of abuse and neglect. Amongst these charges were accusations that staff was improperly euthanizing the animals, causing the animals painful and lengthy deaths, sometimes taking up to an hour to die. When police discovered bodies of the animals in freezers, not a single animal had a shaved paw (the paws of animals are shaved so a vein can be located). The man in charge admitted to police that not only did he not locate veins before injecting the lethal injection; he sometimes injected it straight into the animal's chest cavity. He also told police that some animals took so long to die that in the meantime they scratched at the floor so hard that the hair on the paws came off and their paws bled. No-kill supporters realize that there will always be a need for euthanasia, but even murderers on death row are guaranteed no cruel and unusual forms of punishment, is it too much to grant helpless animals the same mercy? If the public knew of the cruel ways animals were put to death, they would once again be left with feelings of guilt for the animals they could not adopt, possibly preventing them from visiting and adopting shelters animals. More than that though, shelters should provide mercy to all animals, even when they have to end that animal's

life. By providing mercy and proper care, and maintaining a clean environment, shelters will be more appealing to the public, thus increasing the number of people that visit shelters and adopt animals.

While animal shelter deaths due to euthanasia as a means of animal control will not disappear overnight, if shelters began implementing one or more of the programs described above, shelter deaths could begin to decrease. As our nation moves towards a no-kill society, millions of lives will be spared a sad life and an even sadder end. Society promotes compassion for people who can't help themselves, and it is time to extend this compassionate outlook to our animal companions. They depend on us to protect them and care for them, but so far we have not provided this for them. Even in situations where an animal's basic needs have not been met, many times that animal will still show love and trust to a person. Companion animals trust us to care for them to the best of our ability and it is time we begin doing so.

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